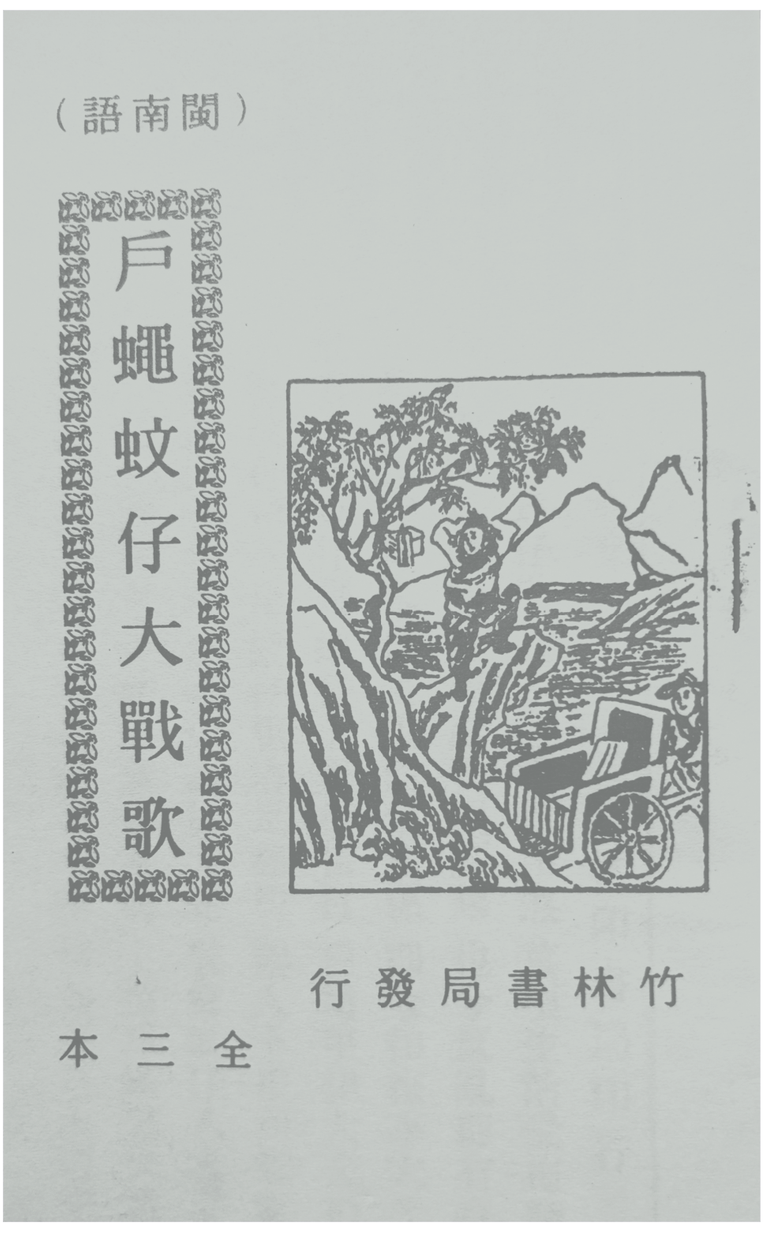
vertigo of swallows in my ear
耳中群燕繞飛的眩暈

Hong-Kai Wang
with Haytham el-Wardany, Phoebe Giannisi,
Gavin Steingo, Matariki Williams

February 19–April 19, 2026

Libby Leshgold Gallery



vertigo of swallows in my ear is part of Hong-Kai Wang's ongoing research into kua a tsheh, Taiwanese ballad booklets. Wang's close read of the moral ballad *The Great Battle between the Fly and the Mosquito* is a consideration of practices of listening as embodied and relational. While fables and folk tales often end with a clear caution or lesson, *The Great Battle Between the Fly and Mosquito* is distinct in that its delivery and message remains contingent on the time and the environment of transmission and reception. Wang focusses on the way these songs have been interpreted, improvised and sung over time[1], and how these changes have emphasized collective forms of authorship particularly during times of social and political upheaval.

The iterative nature of Wang's work and wider research reflects the way these moral ballads circulate. The first iteration of this project took the form of a book, *Our Words Don't Suit Prophecies Anymore,* and an installation at the Taichung Art Museum in 2025. Expanding on Wang's installation in Taichung *vertigo of swallows in my ear* will feature a newly commissioned sound work of *The Great Battle Between the Fly and the Mosquito* sung by Ting Melody accompanied by Shiu Jin Lian on a large Taiwanese lute.

The publication took as its point of departure the moral ballad *The Great Battle Between the Fly and the Mosquito* to reorient our comprehension of human and other-than-human relations, and practices of listening. Why do humans seek to communicate with other species? Within different literary genres, such as fables, myths, and folk tales, animals are granted the ability to speak, allowing for interspecies communication and abolishing any hierarchy between species. Within these stories, a cast of insects, animals, and mythical creatures frequently take on human characteristics through their speech and behaviour, which can be interpreted as an imposition or reflection of human desires, needs, and will. The contributing writers—Haytham el-Wardany, Phoebe Giannisi, Gavin Steingo, and Matariki Williams reflect on how social and environmental conditions shape practices of listening in critical and expansive ways.

The moral ballads, the travelling singers and musicians, the convened social gatherings are all elements of Hong-Kai's ongoing research into the ethics of listening in relation to the politics of hidden histories and memory work. Wang is interested in how these social gatherings function as a form of self-organizing outside of official formal systems. She draws on the concept of 江湖 jiānghú as foundational to comprehending the wider context in which these moral ballads circulated, and a distinctive gathering of members of society from the 'realm of wanderers, hustlers, performers, fighters, healers, and outcasts, governed by reputation, skill, and personal codes rather than law or institutions.'

Our Words Don't Suit Prophecies Anymore (co-published by Libby Leshgold Gallery and Taichung Art Museum) forms the basis of an installation of Wang's work included in the exhibition *A Call of All Being* presented at the Taichung Art Museum from December 2025–April 2026.

1 *The Great Battle between Fly and Mosquito* belongs to the genre "song of admonition." This genre of traditional Taiwanese folk songs originated from the Ming–Qing popular moral ballads in China, with the purpose of advising ordinary people to behave morally and ethically. During the Japanese colonial era (1895–1945), these songs were mostly sung by Southern-Hokkien speaking villagers at gatherings in temples, markets, and squares, or by itinerant performers. These songs served as a "moral book" for those who were illiterate. Their themes often convey the values of filial piety, frugality, hard work, harmony in family and community, amongst others.

← Cover of the song book *The Great Battle between the Fly and the Mosquito,* 2025, from the Chu Lin Bookstore, Hsinchu, Taiwan. Image Courtesy of Hong-Kai Wang.

BIOGRAPHIES

Currently based in Taipei, Taiwan, Hong-Kai Wang is an interdisciplinary artist working across exhibition making, performance, writing, publishing and education. Wang's research-based practice is concerned with ethics of listening in relation to the politics of missing knowledge and memory. Her work seeks to examine divergent modes of attention and to conceive of emergent time-spaces that critically interweave histories of labor, economies of co-habitation, and the production of knowledge and desire.

Haytham el-Wardany is a writer and translator, living and working in Berlin. He spent the last year listening to talking animals, in fables and elsewhere, and learned from them how to speak in moments of danger. His latest book, *Jackals and The Missing Letters* (Al-Karma 2023), considers forgotten expressions of hope within Arabic fables, where animals speak and humans listen, in a moment of post "Arab Spring" speechlessness. In previous publications, including *The Book of Sleep and How to Disappear,* el-Wardany has examined the potential of passivity, through regimes of listening and the dialectics of sleep and vigilance. He is the recipient of the Keith Haring Fellowship in Art and Activism 2022/2023.

Phoebe Giannisi is a poet born in Athens, Greece. Giannisi works as a Professor at the University of Thessaly in the Department of Architecture in Volos, Thessaly. Her hybrid poetic work frequently slips between writing, performance, and media. Working with animal poetics and land songs, she engages various methodologies including land-based field recording, and performance to create a polyphony of voices and texts into what she calls chimeric poetics. She has curated exhibitions, poetic installations, and presented poetry through expanded multimedia and performance formats. Her books have been translated in various languages, and, recently, *Cicada* (2022) and *Chimera* (2024), published by New Directions and translated by Brian Sneeden have been shortlisted for the National Award for Translation in Poetry in the United States. Her next book, *Goatsong* will be published by Fitzcarraldo in November 2025.

Gavin Steingo is a South African musician, scholar, and activist. He is Professor in the Department of Music at Princeton University, where he is also affiliated with the programs in Media & Modernity, Film Studies, Jazz Studies, and African Studies. Gavin is the author of two books, *Interspecies Communication: Sound and Music Beyond Humanity* (2024), and *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa* (2016), and co-editor of the book series "Critical Conjunctures in Music and Sound." He co-directs The Animal Song Collective, a research initiative bringing together scientists and humanists to explore the idea of animal song from a cross-disciplinary perspective.

Matariki Williams, with tribal affiliations to Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Hauiti, Taranaki, Ngāti Whakaue, Te Atihaunui-a-Pāpārangi, is a curator, writer and editor in the arts and cultural sector. In 2024–2025, Matariki held the Oroya Day Fellowship in New Zealand Art History in the Art History programme at Victoria University focusing on the continuum of Māori art practice, and is currently teaching the Tohu Tiaki Taonga pilot programme at Te Wānanga o Aotearoa. Previous roles include as Senior Historian, Mātauranga Māori at the Ministry for Culture and Heritage and Curator Mātauranga Māori at Te Papa Tongarewa, the Museum of New Zealand. She is a committee member for Te Hā o Ngā Pou Kaituhi Māori – National Māori Writers Network. Matariki lives and works in Whakatāne, Aotearoa New Zealand.

EVENTS

Artist talk and book launch

Libby Leshgold Gallery
March 26, 6 PM

Song credits:

Vocal by Ting Melody
Yueqin (Chinese moon lute) by Ting Melody
Daguangxian (large Taiwanese lute) by Shiu Jin Lian
Sound recorded by Chen Wochun
Sound remixed by Lo Songce
Special thanks to Huang Pengjen, Yu Yuan-Keng,
Yu Hui-Chen, Ye Wen-Sheng & Tiffany Lay.

Special thanks to Bobbi Kozinuk for providing radios and the transmitter, and technical sound support, Tien Zongyuan for exhibition design at the Taichung Art Museum.

The Libby Leshgold Gallery respectfully acknowledges that we are located on the unceded, traditional and ancestral xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish) and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) territories.

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For further information, please contact the Libby Leshgold Gallery.

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